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The Role of Faith Based Organisations in a Strategy to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls

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Introduction

This presentation does not reflect a formal position of the World Council of Churches. It does not have any ambitions to be a scientific contribution to the discussion of the expert group. Instead, my paper is basically a reflection of my own experience of working for thirty-five years in the intersection of faith and politics, both out of Sweden and in the global arena.

It is a scandal that violence against women is still an everyday reality in the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and girls all over the world. The scandal is aggravated by the fact that, more often than not, victims are accused of bringing the violence upon themselves – for being disobedient wives or for dressing in a provocative way, or for any number of reasons, all of which aim at pushing the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim.

The magnitude of the on-going violence against women, in homes, in public spaces, and in wars and conflicts, is well-known and carefully documented. Scientific studies and testimonies from abused women have been presented over the years at conferences, in reports, in media, and in courts of law. No one can say: We did not know.

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

UN concern and government commitments

Violence against women has been on the UN agenda for a long time and has, over the years, been addressed in many different ways. Almost 20 years ago, the Beijing Platform for action identified violence against women as one of its critical areas of concern.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been adopted and ratified by most member states.

In the resolution 64/137 from 2010, the General Assembly reaffirms the obligation of States *“to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and reaffirming further that discrimination on the basis of sex is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international human rights instruments, and that its elimination is an integral part of efforts towards the elimination of all forms of violence against women.”*

But there is still a long way to go before women and girls can sense that such global or any national-level commitment will have consequences in their own, day-to-day lives. UN conventions and national legislation is not enough. As long as there is cultural or even religious acceptance of violence against women, change will not happen. That is why it is critical that all sectors of civil society are challenged to take part in integrated efforts towards the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. With your permission, I would like to reflect on the role of faith based organizations in civil society, looking in particular at their potential to contribute to change; but also at their roles in continuing to support norms and attitudes that legitimize violence against women and girls.

Identity of a faith based organisation

Far from everyone is religious, but faith plays a role in almost all cultures and communities around the world. The religious dimension to life is a reality for millions. Religious narratives and religious references are essential for many in their understanding of themselves and of their role in family and society. It is, however, important to realize that identity through one's faith is different from the identity offered through membership in a political party or in other civil organizations.

A political party has a political manifest, or a program defining the vision of society and the way forward to fulfil that vision. Membership in a party implies an affirmation of the program's vision and a commitment to contribute to the fulfilment of that vision. A faith community is primarily a community of shared faith, or yearning for faith, or respect for the faith of ancestors and countrymen and women. Diverging political opinions are not often justifications for expelling individuals from a faith community because such a community is not based on the affirmation of a set of dogmatic principles. Rather, membership derives from a confirmation of faith by conviction, birth, cultural ties, or in several other ways.

But, obviously, most religious communities have doctrinal teachings, outlining the interpretation of faith and defining principles for ethical behaviour. It goes without saying that there are many, and at times conflicting, religious interpretations of how to live responsibly. Political responses can be incredibly diverse – not only between religions but also within the same faith tradition. The cultural context in which faith is lived determines, to a large extent, the parameters for reflection on how to act responsibly when meeting contemporary challenges. It is not difficult for most Swedish Lutherans to accept and for

many to promote same sex marriages, whilst Lutherans from Tanzania or Ethiopia cannot accept such a position at all. And still the fundamental teachings are the same in each of these locales.

This is but a small illustration of the fact that faith cannot automatically be translated into a specific political or social program. And still, it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that anything goes in the name of religion. Common for most religions is a basic understanding of responsibility for one's neighbour and nature. Most of the ethical debate within religious communities is about how to understand and interpret that responsibility in relation to contemporary challenges. Many times responsibility has been interpreted as the duty to engage in charity, but there are also many examples of how faith has inspired individuals and groups to address root causes for poverty, humiliation, and injustice. Ethical conclusions related to faith may vary, but a respectful theological debate on social ethics can still take place, and it does take place in most faith traditions.

In spite of all the different and, at times, conflicting interpretations of how to assume social responsibility, there is space for a meaningful interaction with faith based communities at global, national, and local levels. Only the strictest fundamentalists would exclude themselves from any kind of dialogue on current and contentious social issues. For them a sincere search for truth has been substituted by the conviction of being the chosen custodians of the one and only truth. They have in many ways become more political actors with defined political programs than the bearers and communicators of a faith tradition. This leaves little or no space for them to engage in a dialogue with other religiously rooted communities, or even with society at large, locally, nationally or globally.

How to identify faith based communities as dialogue partners?

It is indeed not easy to identify truly representative spokespeople for the faith based community, particularly at a global level. Faith traditions are often highly different in structure and organization from one another. Some have a hierarchical structure; others are more parliamentary; some have few if any global or regional structures, and others have a more imagined and associative order for defining members and followers. It is not possible to identify or locate a global body representative of faith based communities. Ultimately, it is faith – and not doctrine or structure – that characterizes this heterogeneous patchwork of communities around the world. Faith is expressed differently from one organization to another. In a way, identifying a representative of faith based communities is like seeking a CEO of the Internet, someone who can truly speak on behalf of the myriad users of such a fluid technology.

Engaging comprehensively with the amorphous faith community is extremely complex, but it is essential to do so in any strategy seeking to eliminate violence against women and girls. One entry point could be through locally rooted Faith Based Organizations. They are important because they are actors for changing or maintaining customs, which legitimize violence against women. Faith Based Organizations are many, and they are highly contextual – for better or worse.

Over a number of years, a loosely composed interreligious coalition of faith related organizations has become highly vocal – not least in relation to the social agenda of the UN. Through a rigid but effective advocacy strategy, this coalition has managed to establish a 'faith based' voice, opposing the advancement of women's rights (particularly in regards to reproductive health). Slowly but surely, their voice has become perceived as the sole faith

based position on family, reproductive health, gender rights, and on other issues relevant to the UN agenda on women.

These vocal groups have contributed to the perception that there should be a real conflict between freedom of religion and women's rights. No doubt these groups are seriously and genuinely rooted in faith, but it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that their discourse reflects only bits and pieces of a complex global patchwork of faith based communities. That is why it is important to diversify the interaction with the faith based community. And it is accordingly crucial to bring the locally rooted experiences and reflections to the joint discussion and strategy on how faith based organisations in civil society can contribute to the elimination of violence against women and girls.

Is the world more religious now?

There is no doubt that the religiously rooted discourse has a more visible and audible presence in the public arena now than it did some decades ago. However, the question is: Has religiosity grown?

During a large part of the 20th century, broad political narratives provided tools to interpret history, to define current times, to shape a vision for the future, and to offer a roadmap of how to achieve a better society. These narratives emerged from the socialist, social liberal, and social democratic movements and others; they played crucial roles in putting people's desires for a better future into perspective, and they offered clear suggestions for how to improve lives.

Several political ideologies waned following the cold war and were replaced by philosophies that are more prescriptions than political ideologies, focussing on how to handle markets and money. This shift has given extremely limited room for visions and dreams of people living in precarious conditions. To some extent, religious narratives can compensate for the lack of secular perspectives on how to achieve a better society. Religions simply have better frames of reference, and directives, through the deep narratives they offer.

Increasingly, these narratives are being linked to political messages – for the purpose of putting suffering, identity, dignity and hope into perspective. However, my firm belief is that this development reflects the failure of the political visions, suggesting strongly the need for the return or growth of religion. This opens up a challenge to political perspectives and opinions by reminding us that most religious traditions share a common command to love our neighbour and nature.

A debate on the common good is possible to have with faith based, or faith inspired communities, without turning it into a theological discourse. In other words, faith based communities can be engaged in a dialogue on human dignity and responsibility for one's neighbour. This is, by and large, an asset and not an obstacle in a joint effort to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Is there religious justification for violence against women and girls?

It is not easy to give a clear answer to this question. In most cases, it is almost impossible to draw a clear line between what is cultural tradition and what is expression of religious belief. Stoning of women, female genital mutilation, punishment of disobedient wives, honour violence, corrective and marital rape, and other expressions of violence against women at home or in public spaces are often deeply rooted in cultural tradition, in social hierarchy, and in established mechanisms of power and control.

If it is true that religion and culture are interwoven into the same fabric, it is not possible to say if the main source of inspiration in the minds and hearts of people is religious or cultural. Mostly, religious groups accept these forms of violence, without any particular religious reflection. The acceptance does not appear to be linked primarily to religious faith or belief, but rather related to the cultural context in general. There are, however, examples of how religious leaders have forcefully spoken out against these forms of violence, explaining that there is no religious justification for it.

Bishop Tutu in South Africa is probably one of the most well-known examples of a strong religious leader, acting forcefully against apartheid and other forms of racism and oppression. But there are also thousands of examples of how local, faith based groups on a daily basis challenge attitudes in environments where women traditionally are subjected to violence. Some are actively involved in breaking the stigmatization of women living with HIV and AIDS, not least by addressing the issue of faith and sexuality. Others work to prevent young women being trafficked and to bring victims of trafficking back to a life of dignity.

Faith based groups involve young men and women in joint reflections on femininity and masculinity, with the intention of challenging attitudes. Others focus on female leadership at various levels. There are many examples of how programmes run by faith based organizations are gender-mainstreamed, and of how policies are adopted to develop programs for dealing with abuse, violence and unhealthy attitudes within their own organizations.

But there are also several examples of how faith based communities and their leaders actively or passively give legitimacy to violence against women and girls. Faith in itself does not define attitudes toward violence. Religion, however, has the potential both to challenge and to confirm customs and behaviours.

Family and women

The cultural context for tolerating violence against women is important, and there is no doubt that faith based communities have the potential to play a role in bringing about change in attitudes – in regards to legislation and interpersonal relations, society in general and to families in particular.

It is uncontroversial to state that family is of pivotal importance for individuals and society. It is the place to develop responsibility and care among society's members. And it should be a safe place for children to grow up. There is no controversy in the basic understanding that family is crucial for the well-being of men, women and children. Contention rests, however, with how governments should, or should not, interact with families.

In Christian theology, there is a principle of subsidiarity. Sometimes it has been understood as the principle of non-interference. I don't understand it that way. It is rather a sophisticated principle, defining the balance between individual responsibility and communal solidarity. When family fails to care for its members, the community, local government and national government have the responsibility to step in. And yet highly vocal faith-inspired organizations advocate for leaving the families to themselves and even, at times, insinuate that governmental interference would be contrary to freedom of religion.

At a meeting in Madrid in May this year, a loose coalition of organizations called World Congress of Families (many of which are active in advocacy in relation to the UN) came together with the intention to defend family values and family rights. The participants adopted the following statement: *"The natural family and not the individual is the basic unit*

of society.” This is not the time or place to reflect over the notion of natural family, which is problematic, but to try to see what consequences would transpire if individual rights were replaced by the rights of the family as a group.

Governments have the responsibility to encourage people to actively assume responsibility towards each other, through their families, and also to support and protect individuals who are abused and who have no means of protection. There should never be spaces where this responsibility towards individuals ceases to exist, in the name of family, freedom of religion, or through any other sphere. Individuals have the right to form a family, and that right must be protected. But the individual family members must always count on their protection and support, as individuals. It is unacceptable that children are abused or beaten under a canopy of family and parental rights. It is also never acceptable that women and girls are exposed to physical, sexual or mental violence, whether it happens at home or in the public sphere.

The best way to promote families as the basic unit of society is to have a well-functioning legal framework and a robust system granting its members access to health, education and employment. According to the famous song performed by Marilyn Monroe, a girl’s best friend is diamonds. Certainly, diamonds can come in handy if the donor decides to disappear. Instead of diamonds, a girl’s best friend is a functioning and robust rights-based system, which promotes and protects her right to education, access to the labour market, and affordable care for her or her partner’s ageing parents. The alleged conflict between family and individual is not real. Roles are different but truly complementary.

Faith based or faith inspired groups, which claim that it is close to an abuse of freedom of religion to develop policies aiming at securing the rights of all family members, seem by and large to pursue a political and not a faith based agenda. Freedom of religion has to be protected. But defending religious rights does not imply the acceptance of the violation of women’s rights. What would be an abuse to freedom of religion if women and girls were secured the right to protection and services? It is not difficult to detect a political agenda in the arguments to have the head of a family to make choices on behalf of individual family members. But it is harder to find any faith based arguments for such an agenda. At the end of the day, families would grow weaker, not stronger, by limiting the responsibility of government in relation to individual family members.

Because domestic violence is a reality around the world, it is important to involve faith based communities in an active strategy to counteract such violence. A broad debate on responsible interaction amongst families, their individual members and the larger community is of pivotal importance. Domestic violence can be neglected or silenced in the name of the family as the ruling norm. So even if it is difficult to find religious leaders who actively defend violence against women, these leaders can indirectly contribute to that violence by defending, or by doing nothing to change, violence against women within the family.

Victim’s economy

Faith based organizations develop, run and fund myriad social services and hospital care services. Accordingly, it is important to involve them actively in joint strategies to eliminate violence against women and girls. They can provide in-depth knowledge about trends and tendencies in all aspects of violence against women: domestic violence, violence in public, or violence against women in war and conflict.

Faith based hospitals and organizations for social work do not only provide curative care for victims, but they are also potential partners in a broader dialogue about the economy of

violence. There are big costs associated with hospital care and victim protection. A big part of these costs are carried by faith based institutions, but these costs are seldom reported. There should be an evidence-based dialogue with partners involved in caring for victims. The aim for such a dialogue should be to discuss strategies to shift costs from curative to preventive measures. The voices and testimonies from those who attend to victims are important, not least in the efforts to increase the general knowledge of the prevalence and magnitude of violence against women. Faith based organizations should also be partners in strategies to change attitudes about violence against women and children.

Deal with religions in an informed way

Religion and faith is a reality in the lives of individuals and in society at large. Norms and attitudes are often formed in an intricate interface between faith based and broader cultural influences. It is, therefore, important to build religious literacy among actors, with the mandate to develop strategies to eliminate violence against women and girls. There is at times a bit of “theofobia” (or fear of religion) in governments and global agencies, and that has to be replaced by active efforts to increase religious literacy. With basic knowledge about the role and characteristics of religions in society, the possibility to reach out to religious leaders and faith based communities in a constructive way will increase.

It is good but not enough to know that it is central to most faith traditions to be responsible. It is important to know how that is played out in doctrine, through social ethics, and in the day-to-day lives of people in faith based communities. In order to establish valid platforms for interaction with faith based communities, there is need for religious literacy among actors from UN agencies and governments. Without such literacy, there is a risk that potential partners for change will not become a part of any joint effort to address issues related to violence against women and girls.

How can faith communities be actively involved in eliminating violence against women?

Against the background of the complexity of faith based communities at local, national and global levels, there are still many possibilities to increase the interaction between faith-based communities and the UN and other relevant actors.

- Networks like the Caritas and Action by Churches Together are major faith based players in the field of development and humanitarian assistance. Both networks primarily work through and in cooperation with local churches and faith related social organisations. This gives them unique knowledge and access to local faith based organisations. They should be invited to be advisors and interlocutors within a joint UN strategy to address violence against women and girls.
- Invite women who are actively involved in local faith based communities to present their narratives about violence against women at regional and global events.
- When possible, invite faith based organizations involved in gender issues to give input on shadow reporting on gender-based violence to CEDAW. Invite religious leaders to reflect on these reports.
- Promote interdisciplinary research with participation of theologians on the role of faith in maintaining or challenging attitudes on violence towards women.
- Promote religious literacy by forming programs for staff and partners in a joint strategy to eliminate violence against women.

- Invite faith based hospitals and social service organisations to share their statistics and analyses on the general costs of victim care and protection. Also, invite them to reflect on their contribution to a joint strategy to eliminate violence against women.

Conclusion

For the individual woman or girl, it does not matter if the violence against her is rooted in religion, culture or general criminality. It does not matter if it occurs at home, in the streets, or during war. The pain and humiliation is the same. It is a joint responsibility of all sectors of society to address and to analyze any kind of mitigating attitude towards gender-based violence. There is no doubt that faith based communities have a crucial role to play. It is up to us to make the role play out.